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ABSTRACT

This booklet offers guidelines for parents on how to assess aspects of caregiver competency and program environment that indicate quality child care. Issues briefly discussed include: (1) types of day care available; (2) choice of home-based versus center-based care; (3) caregiver characteristics such as warmth and responsiveness, encouragement of intellectual growth, respect for individual needs, and good discipline techniques; (4) program characteristics such as emotional climate, adult-child ratio, safety, organization, and equipment; and (5) danger signals. (JMB)

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CHECKING OUT CHILD CARE:

A Parent guide

by Jane R. Gold and Joan M. Bergstrom

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Joan M. Bergstrom

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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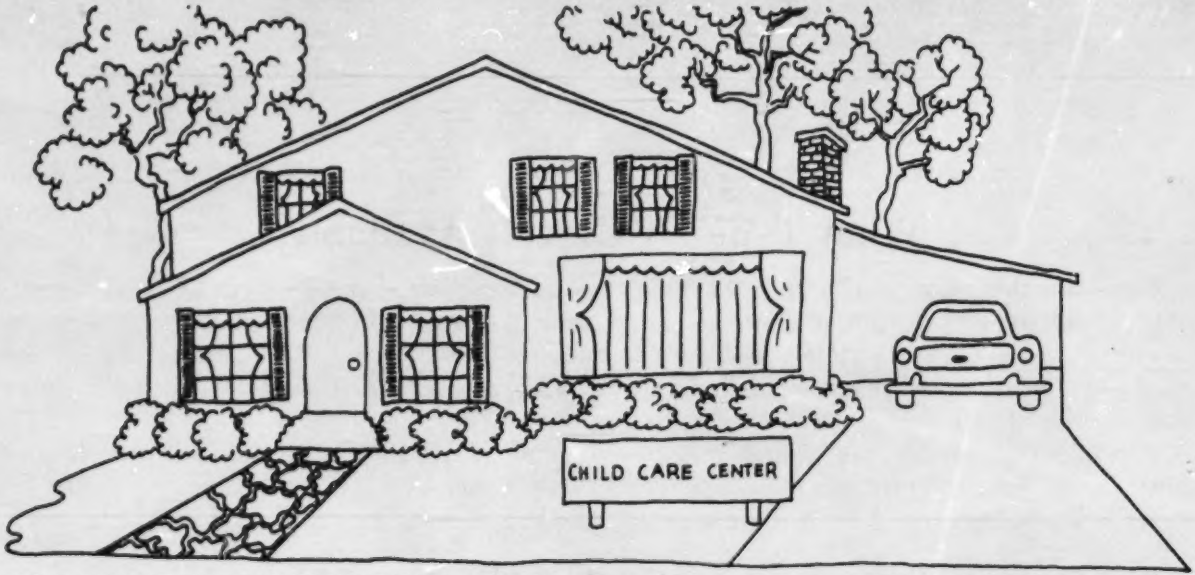


There are no set rules for selecting a child care program. What's good for one child and one family may not be the best choice for another. However, there are some general issues relating to caregiver competency and the program environment that indicate quality child care and are applicable to all programs, whether they are home-based or center-based. This booklet will explore these issues to help you make the best possible decision about where to leave your child during the day.

But first. . .

What Type Of Care Is Available?

There are two forms of day care available to you: *home-based care* and *center-based care.*

In a home-based program, children are cared for by a caregiver in the child's own home or the caregiver's home. When a child is cared for in someone's else's home, it is known as "family day care". In a center-based program, children are placed in a preschool situation involving a teaching staff and classroom.

The following groups can probably help you locate both family day care and center-based programs in your community:

- the local Department of Welfare may offer lists of all local day care programs.
- the city or state agency responsible for licensing day care programs may also provide a list. (You can get the exact title of this agency from the Department of Welfare or from your local community zoning board.)

- local chapters of NOW and other women's organizations frequently have child care task forces and information services.
- teachers and administrators in local elementary schools and preschool programs can help identify day care programs in your area.
- your local Community Coordinated Child Care (4-C) organization, state or local Office for Children, or state lobby group for children can help.
- you also can look under "day care" or "nursery schools" in the yellow pages of the telephone book, or refer to the classified sections of your daily and weekly local newspapers, which often carry ads from area programs.

Which To Choose: Home Or Center-Based?

The basic choice of home or center-based program begins with your own preferencs. Some parents believe children should remain in a home environment until school age. Others believe a structured school-like environment is best.

The *most important thing you can do* when selecting a program for your child is to visit a number of child care homes and programs before you make your final decision. Before you visit, call to make certain the program will meet your needs regarding:

- the hours of the day and days of the week you need child care.
- the age of your child.
- transportation, if you cannot provide your own.

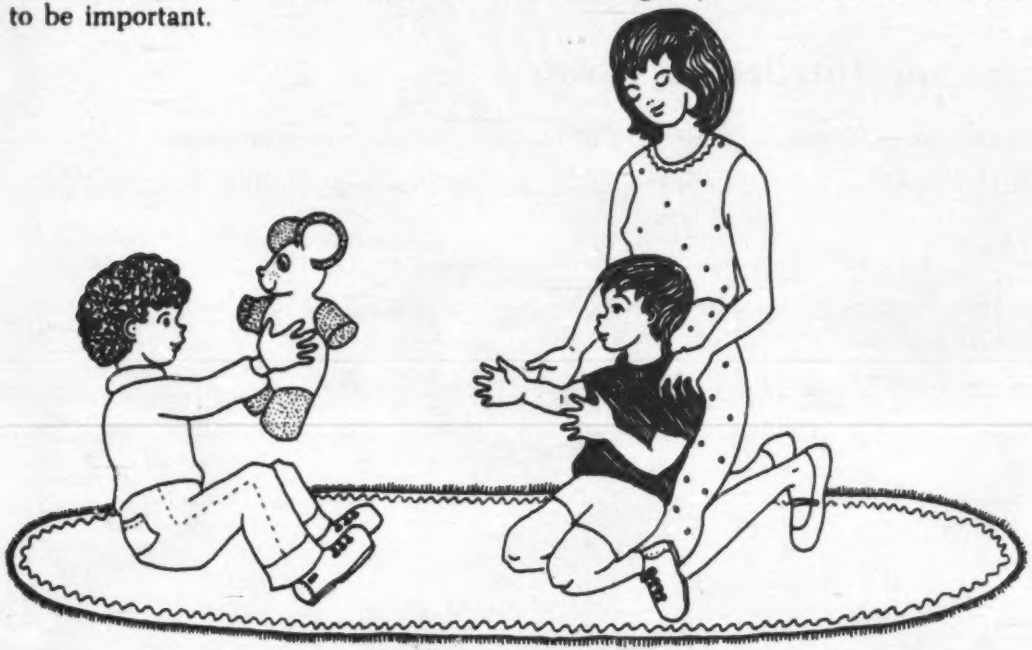
Who Is The Right Person To Care For Your Child?

Generally speaking, it does not really matter if the program you select is home-based or center-based, or whether the teaching used is Montessori, "open learning," or any other method. *The care your child receives will only be as good as the caregiver* who is providing the care and who is arranging your child's environment. *A competent caregiver should be: warm and responsive with children; encouraging of intellectural growth and development; respectful of the child's individual needs; able to cope with the demands of caring for children; and consistent and fair in disciplining them.*

Warm And Responsive With Children

- Does the caregiver smile and look *directly* at the children when talking with them?
- Does the caregiver appear to be physically relaxed with the children when touching, talking with, approaching them?
- Do the children appear to trust the caregiver and freely turn to her or him for help, information, comfort?
- Where does the caregiver appear to spend most of her or his time? — working with the children; arranging materials; talking with other adults, parents or staff in the program?

Be a little wary if the children appear to be either too independent or too dependent on the caregiver. Being too independent might indicate the caregiver does not respond to children when they need help, while being too dependent might mean the caregiver is overly possessive and directive. Where a caregiver spends *most* of her or his time can give you a clue as to what she or he considers to be important.



Encouraging Intellectual Growth

- Does the caregiver guide children in using toys, materials or equipment?
- Does the caregiver ask children yes-or-no questions more often than questions that require creative, thoughtful or imaginative answers?
- Does the caregiver allow/encourage decision-making by the children?
- Does the caregiver have a set routine or schedule organized for the children? Are you pleased with this schedule?
- How much television do the children watch during the day?

Look for a good combination of creative guidance and freedom for unscheduled self-exploration. Children need to be challenged in their problem-solving skills. A question that requires a yes-or-no answer does not encourage the children to reason out a solution to a problem. It also implies a right or wrong way of doing things that can be destructive to the child's own exploration and ability to make decisions.

Adults and children in group situations feel more comfortable if they operate within a framework that identifies for them their roles and responsibilities at different times during the day. If children are to have diversity of activity, there must be thoughtful organization of people and materials in advance. If activities are not given a specific time slot, field trips and outdoor play might take place infrequently and meal and nap times might be confusing and hastily arranged.

Respectful of Children's Individual Needs

- Do the caregiver's expectations and treatment differ for girls and for boys? What norms for good behavior in girls and in boys does she or he have? Does she or he reprimand the girls and the boys differently?
- Does the caregiver's attitude and home or center reflect through the selection of pictures, photographs, and books an awareness of and respect for ethnic and cultural backgrounds?
- Does the caregiver categorize children or gossip about their families?
- Do you think the caregiver will be able to meet the special needs of your child, such as the need for comfort when getting up from a nap, or guidance when frustrated by the complexities of a puzzle?

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Able To Cope With The Demands of Caring For Children

- Does the caregiver display humor and common sense in dealing with children?
- Does the caregiver seem to be easily hassled if things are not going right?

Discipline and Rew. d

- How does the caregiver ward and discipline a child? Do you feel comfortable with these methods?
- Is the caregiver's talk with the children heavily sprinkled with do's and don'ts?

Is The Program Environment Good and Safe?

A program's environment includes both the interaction of people and the arrangement and organization of space and materials. When you first visit a day care program, there is so much to see that it can be confusing. The following questions should help you evaluate the overall program environment, to make certain it will be growth producing for your child.

The Emotional Climate Of The Program — Feeling of Togetherness

- Do the children appear to be comfortable and free with other children in the group, or are there numerous fights and disturbances?
- Do the children encourage one another, appear to play well with others in the group, work cooperatively among themselves? Do they do these things without constant interference from adults?
- Does the caregiver help to mediate potentially explosive situations, such as fights over toys, name-calling, or physical aggressiveness?

Observing how children work and play together can clue you into the general wellbeing of a child care program and the skill of the caregiver.

Children tend to react very openly to strain among caregivers by staying away from adults or by being aggressive with other children. The caregiver plays a crucial role in establishing a feeling of togetherness and cooperation, as the one who can settle disputes between children, as a model for mutual cooperativeness.

Size Of Program And The Adult-Child Ratio

- How many children are cared for in the center? in the family day care home?
- Are there enough adult caregivers so that the individual needs of your child will be met?
- Are there enough adults or, in home-based care, older children around so that the program can be flexible in taking children outside to play and on field trips?

As the numbers of children increase, so does the potential for aggression and distractibility. In large, unstructured groups, the constant interaction cuts down on activities which require longer attention span, such as quiet games, puzzles, looking at books, doing art projects.

Most professionals advocate for center-based care that the number of children and the number of adults follow the Federal Interagency Day Care Requirements:

- 3-4 year olds: *one* adult for every *five* children
- 4-6 year olds: *one* adult for every *seven* children
- 6-14 year olds: *one* adult for every *ten* children

In a family day care program, the ratio should be:

- 0-2 year olds: *one* adult for every *two* children
- 0-6 year olds: *one* adult for every *five* children (assuming those five include the caregiver's own children and involve no more than two children under the age of two years).

The Safety Of The Physical Environment

Check for the following:

- No sharp edges on furniture.
- Wall plugs covered, and extension cords not overloaded.
- Detergents, medications, and sharp instruments out of reach. If you don't see where detergents and medicines are kept, ask.
- Stairs and low windows adequately protected. Sufficient exits in case of emergency.
- Sufficient lighting and adequate cleanliness.
- Outside play areas safe from traffic.

It is essential that the day care program be a physically safe place for your child. First, make certain the caregiver is capable of handling any emergency that may arise. Knowledge of first aid is important, and the center should have a well stocked first aid kit on hand. Also, be very thorough in checking the safety of the physical surroundings. Remember, young children are constantly exploring their environment, and it is impossible for a caregiver to keep track of every child every minute of the day. Every effort must be made to minimize the chance of your child being physically harmed. Visit, in particular, the kitchen and bathroom. Ask where detergents and medicines are kept. Observe how the caregiver allows the children to be around — or use — kitchen appliances, especially the stove.

The Amount and Arrangement of Space In The Program

- Is there enough space for the number of children? Is it divided? Is there an outdoor play area?
- If space is divided, who goes where? Is division by age, sex, interest? Are there small areas where a child can go to be alone?
- Are furniture and equipment arranged in such a manner that your child can crawl, walk, and explore freely?
- Are there spaces in the home or center for children to work or play quietly and actively with materials and equipment?
- Are there adequate areas and facilities for children to rest and sleep?
- Are there special areas for a variety of activities: blocks, reading, dress-up, arts and crafts? Are the potentially noisy and active areas — blocks, jungle gyms, housekeeping center — separated physically from the quiet areas — "reading", puzzles, art centers?

In outdoor and indoor areas which have been arranged with children in mind, the caregiver needs to guide and restrict children less. The arrangement of materials in a room or a yard indicate the type of activities which take place in the area and the general code of expected behavior. Separated areas encourage longer periods of uninterrupted play protecting the activities of one area from potentially conflicting activities: for example, block building from dancing.

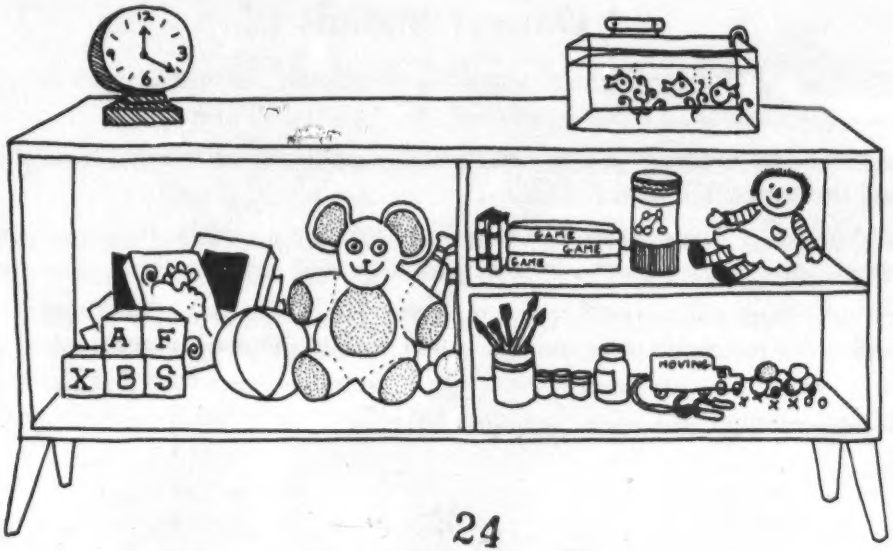
In exploring their physical environment, children must also sense their ability to navigate and move freely. It is important that furniture and equipment be arranged so children can identify traffic "paths" they can use to get from one place to another.

Children occasionally need the feeling of security found in physically small areas, where they may enjoy their solitude. It can be very demanding on children to have to spend all their time in large rooms with a number of other children. Small "cubbyhole" areas allow children to go off and experience the relative peace of investigating a new toy by themselves or with one or two friends. Large open spaces which are not arranged to provide these *needed* areas can be cold and impersonal.

The Organization and Sufficiency of Toys And Materials and Equipment

- Sufficiency of materials. Do you notice a large number of children struggling for the same materials or having to wait more than five minutes to use them?
- Variety of materials. Are there toys and materials for activity times (hoops, balls, wagons, trikes, large climbing blocks) and quiet times (puzzles, trucks, dolls) and shaping materials (clay and blocks)?
- Accessibility and organization of materials. Are the toys and materials within easy reach of the children? Can they get to them without the assistance of an adult? Are the materials neatly arranged so children can tell where things are located and what is available for them to use?

Ask yourself whether the variety of toys and equipment available will maximize your child's growth. Toys and materials should be stored neatly and within the child's reach. Children need a sense of being able to maneuver in their environment without relying on the constant assistance of an adult. This encourages initiative and gives a child a sense of master in meeting her or his own needs.



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! ! Danger Signals ! !

Any of the following "Danger Signals" should automatically rule out a center or home from your final choice:

- The caregiver does not want you to visit the program or ask specific questions about what your child will do during the day.
- The children move about at the program without any guidance from the caregiver for 30 minutes or more: They have no apparent involvement with anything or anyone.
- The caregiver does not respond to the children. He or she looks past them when talking to them and gives the general impression of not caring about or responding to the children's presence.
- The caregiver's voice often sounds angry or cross.

- The caregiver seems overwhelmed with the work and responsibility of caring for children.
- The caregiver is physically rough and abuses the children.
- The house or center is dirty and/or unsafe: The caregiver is messy or sloppy in physical appearance.
- Your child appears unhappy and suddenly doesn't seem to be eating or sleeping well and doesn't have much enthusiasm for playing with you, other children and her/his toys.

Some Final Questions

- Are parents responsible for transportation; supplying food; diapers; volunteering time to the program?
- How long is the child committed upon signing registration — month by month, whole year? Must the child attend all week; or may she/he go on alternate days?
- What is the racial and ethnic mix of the center and how does it correspond to that of the community?
- Does the health-care program include regular checkups? school doctor/nurse on duty or on call; emergency facilities; mental health provisions; at-home care; family counseling? Will the program care for sick children? (NOTE: Make sure you give the caregiver a medical release in case of emergency.)
- What is the policy about payment frequency; itemized extra charges; down payments?
- In home-based programs, who, besides the caregiver will care for children — spouse, older children?

Before finalizing your child care choice, find out who the sponsors are — community organization, school board, industry, privately owned, and so forth. Find out if parents are encouraged to participate in decisions about policy, finances, structure and content of the program. If you are especially interested in such participation, you should look into community-controlled programs.

Finding good child care takes time and effort and can cost you money in missed work. But if you locate a program which you will feel comfortable using and which your child will enjoy, it will be time, effort and money well spent.

About the Authors

Jane R. Gold has been a consultant for child care planning and program development to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's Office of Child Development and other state and federal agencies. Joan M. Bergstrom is an associate professor of early childhood education in infant and toddler behavior and development at Wheelock College. They have also coauthored *Sweden's Day Nurseries: Focus on Programs for Infants and Toddlers* (Washington, D.C.: The Day Care and Child Development Council of America, Inc., 1974).

About The Day Care and Child Development Council of America:

The Day Care and Child Development Council of America is a nonprofit membership organization committed to the support of quality child care for America's families. It's nation-wide membership includes parents, child care providers, other professionals whose work relates to the healthy growth and development of children, and concerned citizens.

Membership in the Council is a concrete way to support more public support and responsibility for the well-being of America's children. Members receive a monthly magazine-newsletter, *Voice for Children*, information about legislation affecting children, opportunities to be involved in local, state and national workshops and conferences, and access to a wealth of practical information about child care.

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Other Publications of the Day Care and Child Development Council of America Which Might be of Interest:

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How Babies Learn to Talk ($2.00) — a language development handbook for parents.

Good Food for My Baby ($2.00) — a nutrition handbook for parents.

The Growth and Development of Mothers ($1.25), published by Harper and Row, by Angela Barron McBride — how mothers develop, too.

Careers in Child Care ($.75) — a guide to various careers related to child care.

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